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TAGS: [SENV](#) [TBIO](#) [PREL](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: LOCAL OFFICIALS IGNORE WATER POLLUTION PROBLEMS IN CANCER
VILLAGES ALONG THE HUAI RIVER

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) "Cancer villages" appear to be as commonplace as water pollution in China. For local residents, it is not a question of whether cancer villages exist, but rather how badly cancer has afflicted the villages. Although local and international journalists have reported periodically on the large number of cancer villages along the Huai River southeastern China, few scientific studies have been conducted to examine the magnitude of the problem. Part of this is likely due to a lack of available and reliable data, but perhaps a more salient explanation is local governments' refusal to accept the findings. Local NGOs, while growing in number and influence, still tread carefully when casting light on cancer villages. Furthermore, central authorities more often than not fail to keep "bumpkin policies" in check, which allow local officials to ignore environmental enforcement in pursuit of financial gain. END SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

2. (SBU) The Huai River is widely-considered to be China's most polluted river. (NOTE: The Huai River originates in Henan Province and flows west to east through southern Henan, northern Anhui, and northern Jiangsu Provinces, where it merges with the Yangtze River. END NOTE) According to Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) statistics (external reports usually indicate an even more dire reality), 70 percent of China's rivers and lakes are polluted to some extent, and 28 percent are too polluted even for irrigation or industrial use. Approximately 90 percent of the water in Chinese cities is too polluted to drink without extensive treatment. Water pollution has not only infiltrated surface waters, e.g., lakes, rivers, streams, and the ocean, but has also contaminated fresh groundwater resources. In the Huai River, more than 75 percent of the water is of grade IV or V, which classifies it as unsuitable even for irrigation use.

3. (SBU) "Cancer villages" are located predominately in rural China, where inadequate treatment of industrial, municipal and agricultural wastewater causes local waterways to be severely contaminated. Some remote or impoverished villages do not yet have effective water purification systems to make available water supplies clean and safe for drinking, but people still need and use whatever water is available in those locations. According to a Ministry of Health (MOH) survey, cancer was the most lethal disease

afflicting both urban and rural residents nationwide in 2006. An internal 2004 World Bank internal project report by World Health Organization (WHO) research scientists PAN Xiaochuan and JIANG Jinhua concluded that there exists a significant positive correlation between levels of chemical oxygen demand (COD), fluorine, and chloride with incidence of stomach cancer among males in the Yangtze and Huai River basins. Studies linking water quality and cancer remain extremely limited, however, and long-term impacts to local ecosystems and human health in China have been difficult to quantify. The problem is compounded by the lack of data sharing between the health, water, and environmental authorities. For example, although water quality is monitored by the Ministry of Water Resources (MWR) in more than 2000 river sections across main rivers in China, this data is not shared with the China Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC).

GRASSROOTS NGOS: ONLY ONE SHOT AT EFFECTING CHANGE

¶4. (SBU) During a recent visit to the region in early-July, Beijing Embassy Science Fellow (ESF) learned that Qiugang village (population 2,300, in Bengbu County of Anhui Province) saw 53 deaths from cancer within 30 months. Three chemical fertilizer-manufacturing plants were discharging effluent directly into the nearby Huai River. Villagers who witnessed the water turn black saw rampant fish kills and dead animal corpses near the river.

¶5. (SBU) Green Anhui, an active local environmental NGO, worked with villagers to conduct basic water quality tests, and subsequently shared results with the Anhui Provincial Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB). Although local environmental authorities initially were unresponsive to Green Anhui's findings, widespread domestic and international press coverage of conditions found in the village eventually pressured the Anhui EPB to order the closure of

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the three fertilizer plants. By the time of Beijing ESF's visit to Qiugang in July 2009, two of the plants had indeed been closed down, but the third plant was still in operation. Residents in the vicinity reported to Beijing ESF that the situation has improved in the last year. However, the site of one of the defunct fertilizer plants is now home to a highly-active auto shop. Large buses and trucks barrel down the narrow village road to the "small enterprise" that now generates and discharges automotive waste (e.g., antifreeze, motor oil, filters, car batteries, tires, radiators, transmission fluid, and gasoline) instead of waste from chemical fertilizer production.

¶6. (SBU) While grassroots efforts proved effective in shutting down some heavy polluters operating in the village, Green Anhui Director ZHOU Xiang told Beijing ESF that future efforts by his NGO would focus more on raising environmental awareness among local residents, and not on seeking to strengthen treatment controls or prevent future waste discharge. Zhou told Beijing ESF that the primary reason for this voluntary shift in the NGO's activities is a fear that if Anhui EPB is directly-challenged further, local government officials likely will take more definitive actions against the NGO's grassroots efforts. Zhou also stated that he does not believe it to be realistic or economically-feasible to remove all polluting factories, so instead, he would prefer to "think of other ways to protect the environment."

¶7. (SBU) In a similar case up one of the Huai River's tributaries in Henan Province, the village of Huangmengying in Shenqiu County had 118 residents (of a total population of 2,400) die of cancer between 1994 and 2004. Huangmengying village, located along the Shaying River, was exposed to severe water pollution in the early 1990s, and as a result, the village saw a dramatic increase in the incidence of colitis (a chronic digestive disease characterized by inflammation of the colon), as well as of rectal and esophageal cancer. According to Shenqiu County's scientific research center, the industrial pollution had contaminated the Shaying River and then seeped into the groundwater, which serves as the village's primary source of drinking water. Mr. HUO Daishan, Director of Huai River Defender, a local environmental NGO based in Shenqiu County,

gradually exposed the problem to international press through photographs taken over the past ten years and a series of monitoring stations, and was able to gather support for converting shallow, individual residential wells to a single 500 meter deep well, as well as centralized water purification systems, to provide the village (and others nearby) access to better quality drinking water.

But the success of this one case has not been repeated and Huo was told by local government officials to cease all future activities. Although both local NGOs Green Anhui and Huai River Defender were successful at improving the water quality of their target villages, both report their future activities will probably be restricted in the future.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS: ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH KEPT SECRET

¶8. (SBU) Local government officials have made efforts to keep these problems under wrap. Due to recent local environmental NGO activities in Anhui and Henan, local EPBs have reportedly told residents and NGOs not to speak or interact with foreign visitors, press, and central government officials. HUO Daishan (of Huai River Defender) would not agree to meet with Beijing ESF in person, for fear of "severe and dangerous" consequences imposed by the Henan EPB. He asked Beijing ESF to first obtain approval from Henan EPB officials, citing that he has had trouble with officials before and has been instructed by them not to speak with "any international entities." (NOTE: Huo's views and comments were otherwise shared with Beijing ESF. END NOTE)

¶9. (SBU) Similarly, ZHOU Xiang of Green Anhui told Beijing ESF that when national-level officials from MEP made an official site visit to Anhui recently, the local EPB instructed villagers to keep quiet and the factories to reduce operations. Zhou said that the Anhui EPB controls all emissions data and does not share the information. Anhui EPB prefers to keep the data collected "baomi," or a secret, and there is no system for promoting transparency within the EPB, with efforts to request data difficult and time-consuming. Another staff member from Green Anhui observed that local government officials can easily obfuscate reporting results submitted to the central government. He added that any recent statements made by MEP officials claiming that the environmental situation in China is "not worsening, but is maintaining steady," are in his view "just

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lies put out by the government to assuage the people."

SPARSE DATA, ONLY ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE FOR NOW

¶10. (SBU) One of the most difficult problems has been the lack of data and transparency necessary to evaluate the true relationship between water pollution and high incidence of cancer in rural villages. The central and local governments have been extremely sensitive about this subject, and there are few scientific studies on pollution and environmental health in China. That said, limited research by China CDC has confirmed a link between high cancer incidences and water pollution in the Huai River. Another epidemiology study of 300,000 cases in 2006-2007 examined the region surrounding the Huai River and found significantly higher mortality and morbidity rates compared with historical rates. Although the central government in 2007 funded China CDC to investigate further the anecdotal water pollution and cancer incidence problems, one China CDC scientist told Beijing ESF that internal factions and lack of coordination among experts within the multiple disciplines involved have prevented China CDC from producing conclusive results.

Because cancer villages are a sensitive topic in China, local representatives have been reluctant to engage the international scientific community in collaborative research projects in this area. However, additional collection, analysis, and publication of scientific data in internationally-recognized journals would be extremely valuable for clarifying the scope of the problem and in identifying possible solutions.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) In Anhui and Henan provinces, the problem of water pollution goes well beyond uncontrolled discharges from large industries, town and village enterprises, and municipal sources. Local residents living in and around the cancer villages understand the need for better air and water quality, but are not aware of the potentially irreversible environmental and health impacts from pervasive and persistent pollution sources. Although the central government may announce new guidance or policies requiring local governments to reduce pollutant loads or require treatment controls, local officials still focus on regional needs that likely differ from national policy and may not investigate environmental health problems. Without better management of the regional EPBs, it will be difficult for the central government to overcome the "inaction" at the local level, which remains the norm due to local officials who seem still primarily motivated by economic development and improving their region's GDP.

¶12. (SBU) The suppression of grassroots efforts to effect change on a small scale, coupled with rising environmental health hazards, may spur social discontent in China. Lax enforcement of environmental regulations and the growing environmentally-related health crisis may further exacerbate an already disgruntled population's sense of official neglect. Growing awareness of these public health risks and nearly 30 years of unchecked pollution have spurred small environmental NGOs and rural residents toward addressing their local problems. Many poverty-stricken inhabitants of the Huai River region, however, still take the government at its word that it is working to address their water pollution and readily accept that a degraded environment still is an acceptable tradeoff for continued economic development. END COMMENT

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